A Call to Minimize Distraction & Respect Users' Attention

By a concerned PM & entrepreneur

go/distraction

Google

I'm concerned about how we're making the world **more distracted**

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And my goal with this presentation is to **create a movement** at Google…

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… to create a new design ethic that aims to **minimize distraction**

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and I'd like to **get your help**.

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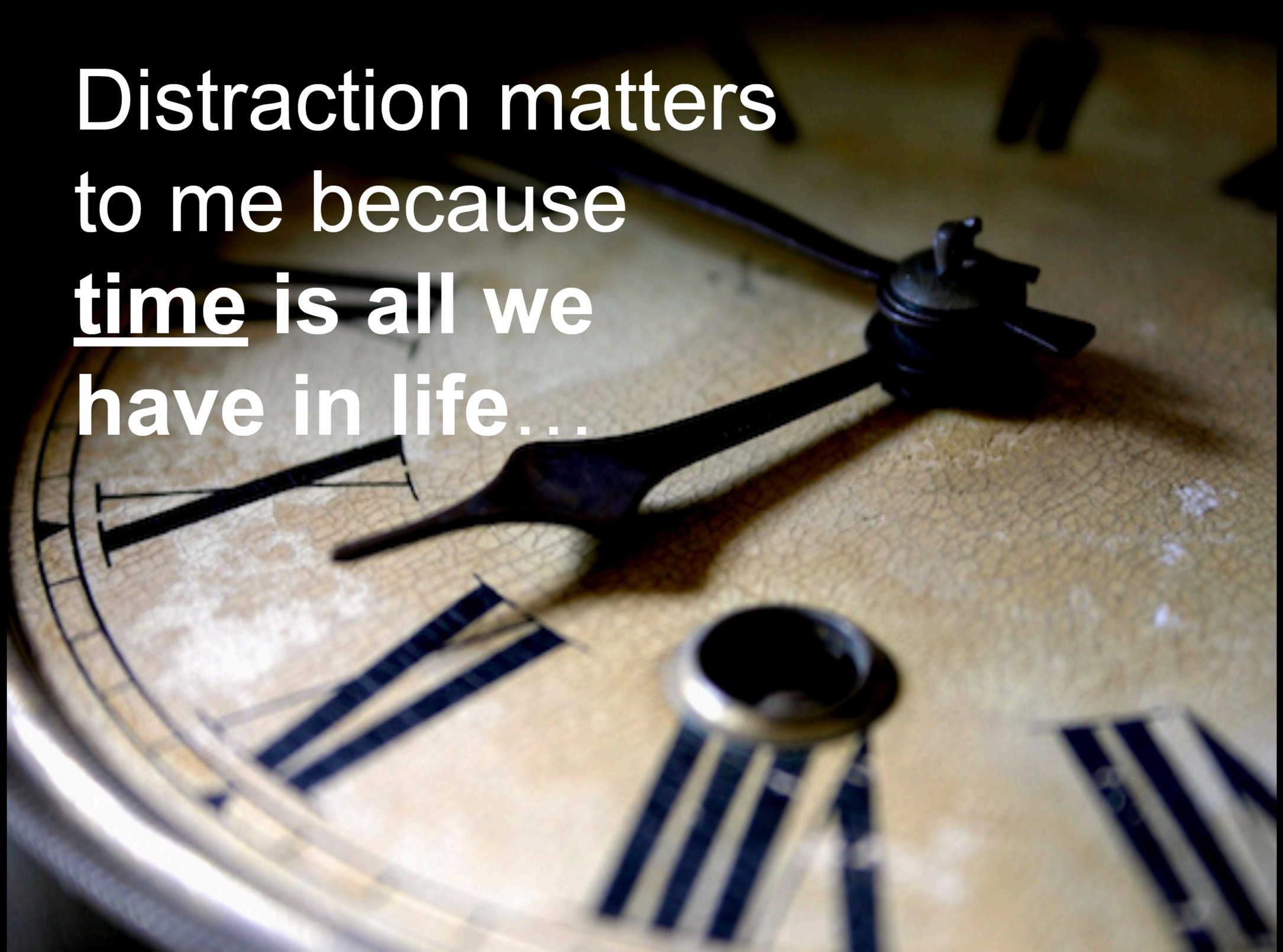
Distraction matters to me because **time is all we have in life…**



… time is **<u>expanded</u>** and **<u>contracted</u>** when we're in flow vs. distracted.

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You've experienced this before…

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More can happen in a **single day** traveling in a remote country, than in **months** of your work life.

Or in one hour
of dancing...

Gmail Calendar Documents Photos Reader Web more Hiking Fan

Gmail by Google

SEARCH MAIL SEARCH THE WEB Show search options Create a filter

Mail

COMPOSE MAIL

Inbox (3)
Starred
Sent Mail
Drafts (2)
Hiking (3)
Urgent!
12 more

Chat
Search, add, or invite
Hiking Fan
Set status here
Emily
Paul

Archive Report spam Delete Move to Labels More 1 - 15 of 15

Jason Cornwell	**Please return my stapler** - Hi, You seem to have taken my stapler. Please,	1:10 pm
Paul McDonald	**Fun Hike Yesterday!** - Thanks for the great hike yesterday, it was awesome	1:06 pm
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[illegible]	[illegible]	Mar 24
Jason Toff	How are you? - Hey there, We haven't spoken in a while. How are you? Wou	Mar 24
[illegible]	[illegible]	Mar 6
Google Voice	New voicemail from (619) 819-5507 at 5:19 AM - Voicemail from: (619) 819-[illegible]	Mar 6

Yet **hours** and **hours** can mysteriously get lost here...

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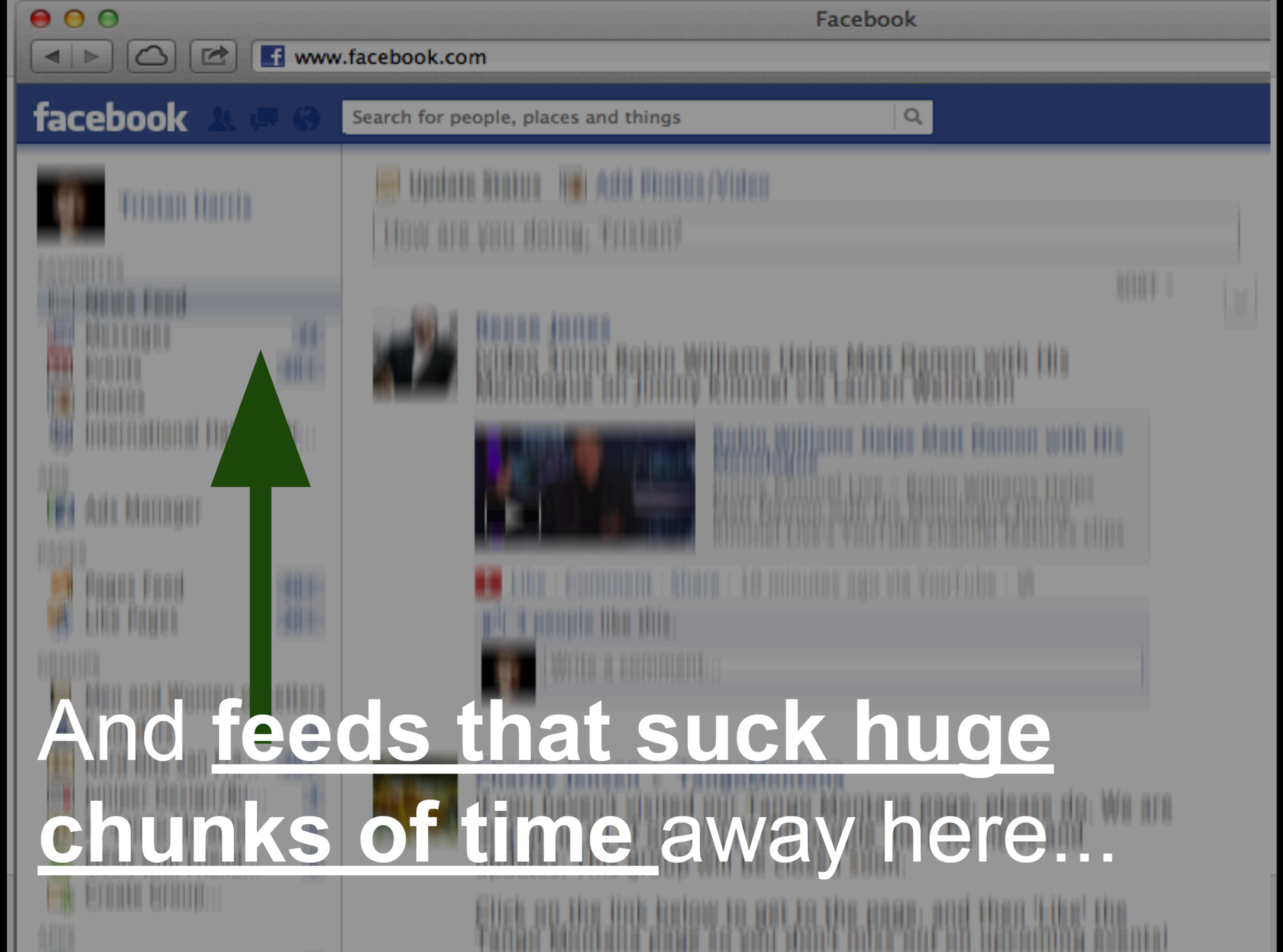
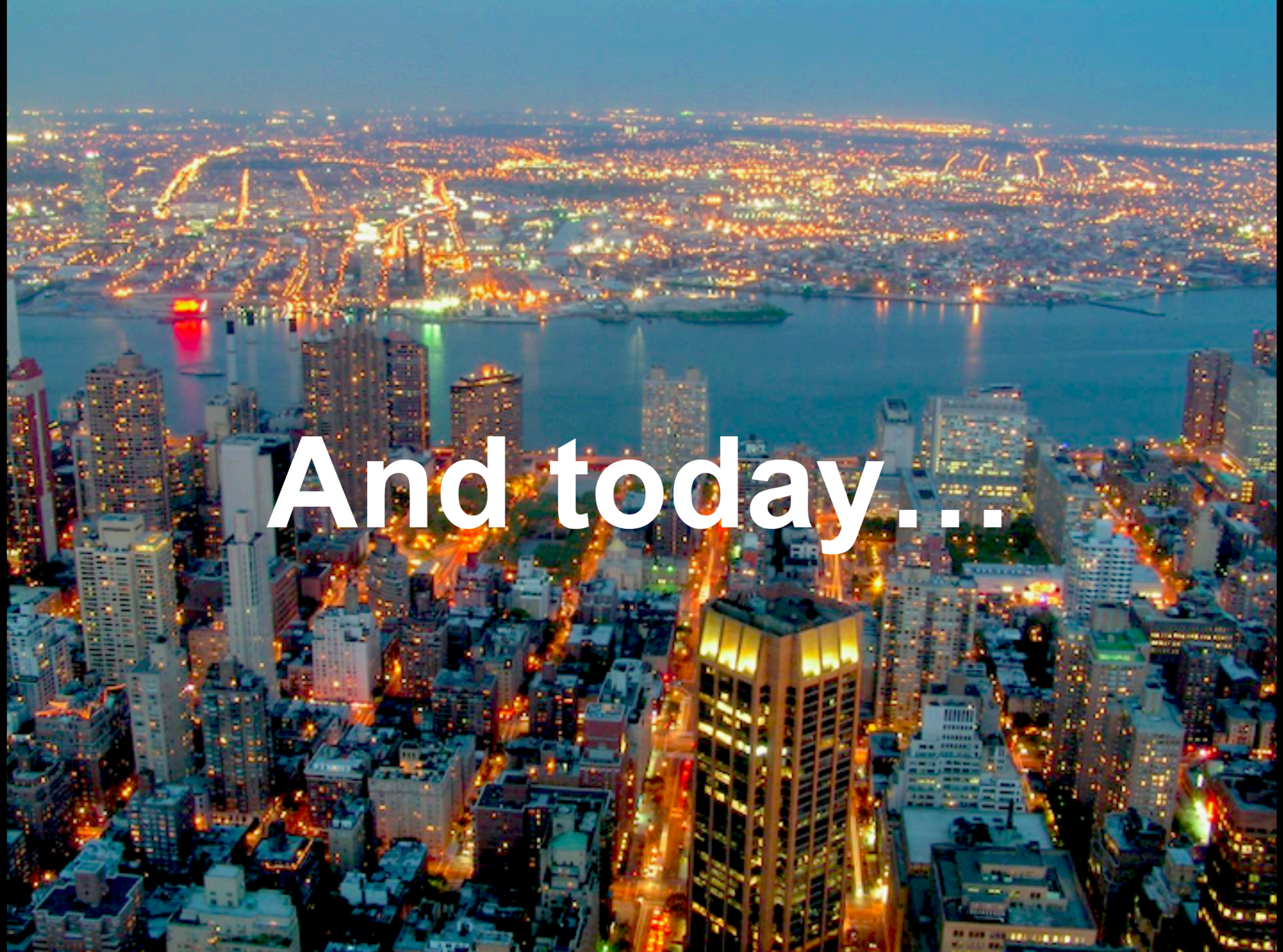

Facebook
www.facebook.com
facebook
Search for people, places and things
And feeds that suck huge chunks of time away here...

…weakening our relationships to each other here

…and destroying our kids'
ability to focus here
(teens 13-17 now send 4,000 texts/month,
once every 6 minutes awake)


And today…

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Technology companies **profoundly influence** where all this attention goes…

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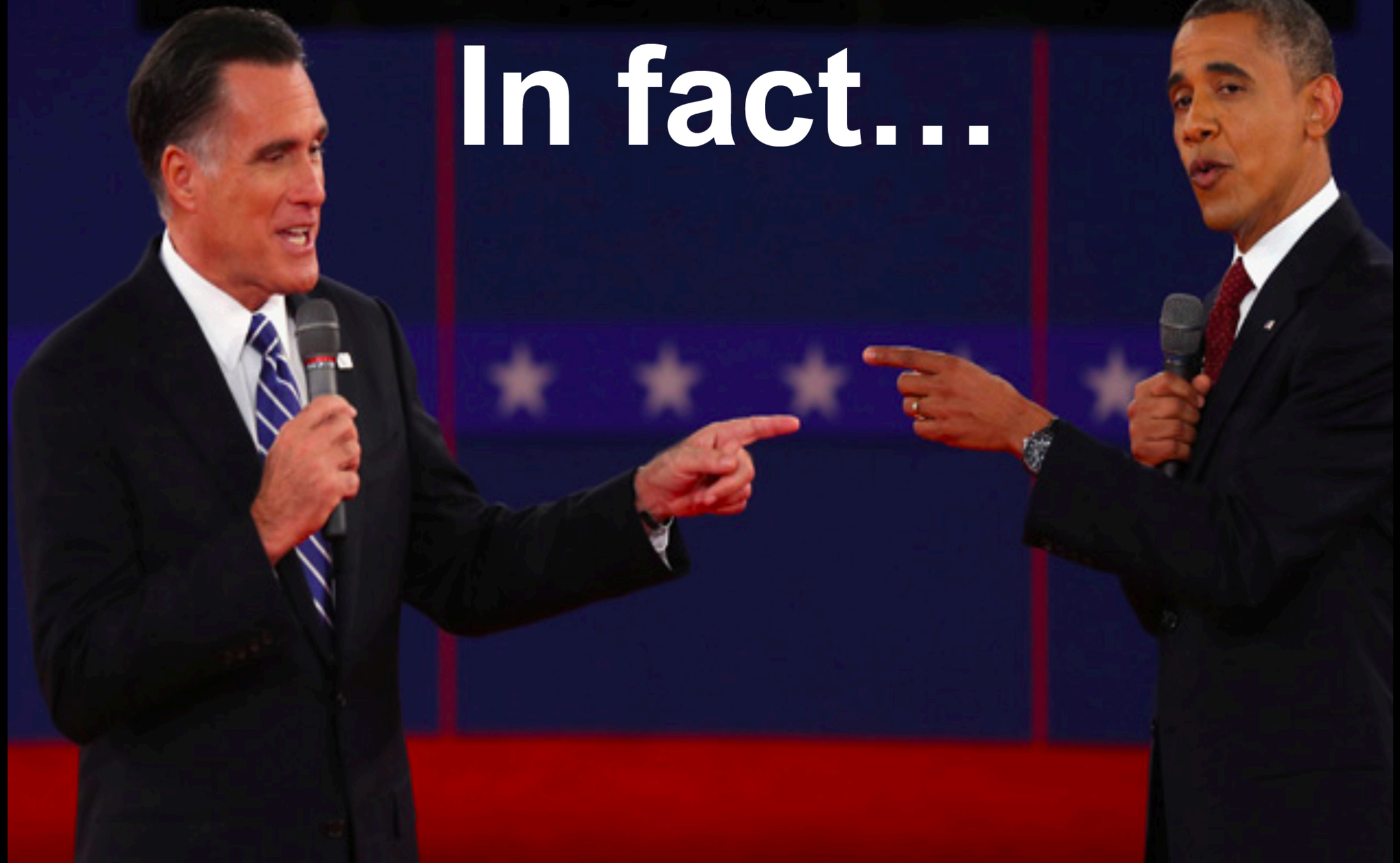
In fact…



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Never before in history…

Google

...have the decisions of a **handful** of designers...

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(mostly men, white, living in SF, aged 25-35)

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… working at 3 companies …

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facebook

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had

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SO

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much

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impact

on how **millions of people around the world spend their attention**

think about that for a second...

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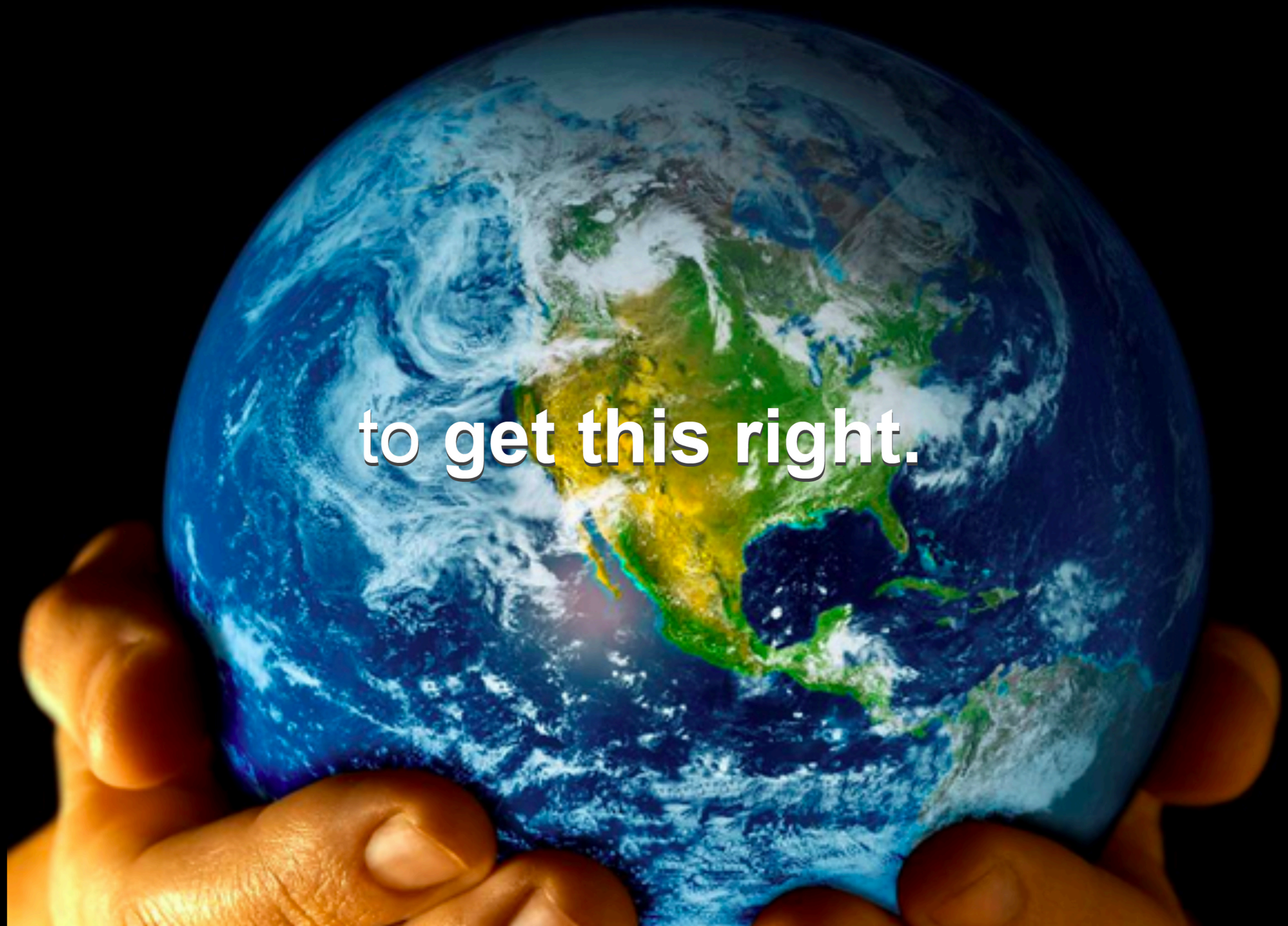
We should **feel**...

…an **enormous responsibility**


to get this right.

Google

The Washington Post

In the News Michelle Obama Inaugural balls Beyonce lip sync Sean Payton Texas shooting

washingtonpost.com > Metro

28 percent of accidents involve talking, texting on cellphones

By Ashley Halsey III
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, January 13, 2010

Twenty-eight percent of traffic accidents occur when people talk on cellphones or send text messages while driving, according to a study released Tuesday by the National Safety Council.

THIS STORY

- More drivers texting on Beltway, study

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Google

We need to **be more rigorous** about these questions than…

“Why don't we make it buzz your phone every time you get an email?”

Now, you might be saying…

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Wait a sec, don't users make their **own choices** here?

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Not always…

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1. We need to acknowledge that humans have certain **vulnerabilities…**

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2. Those **vulnerabilities can be amplified and exploited…**

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3. **<u>… and the design of products we make</u>** can do this, and make people act impulsively..

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Every day, those **vulnerabilities** make us act against our better judgement…

Vulnerability #1: Bad Forecasting

(aka “That won't take long”)

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Google

facebook

Marc Haumann tagged a photo of you.

See Photo | Go to Notifications

Google

what question are we really being asked?

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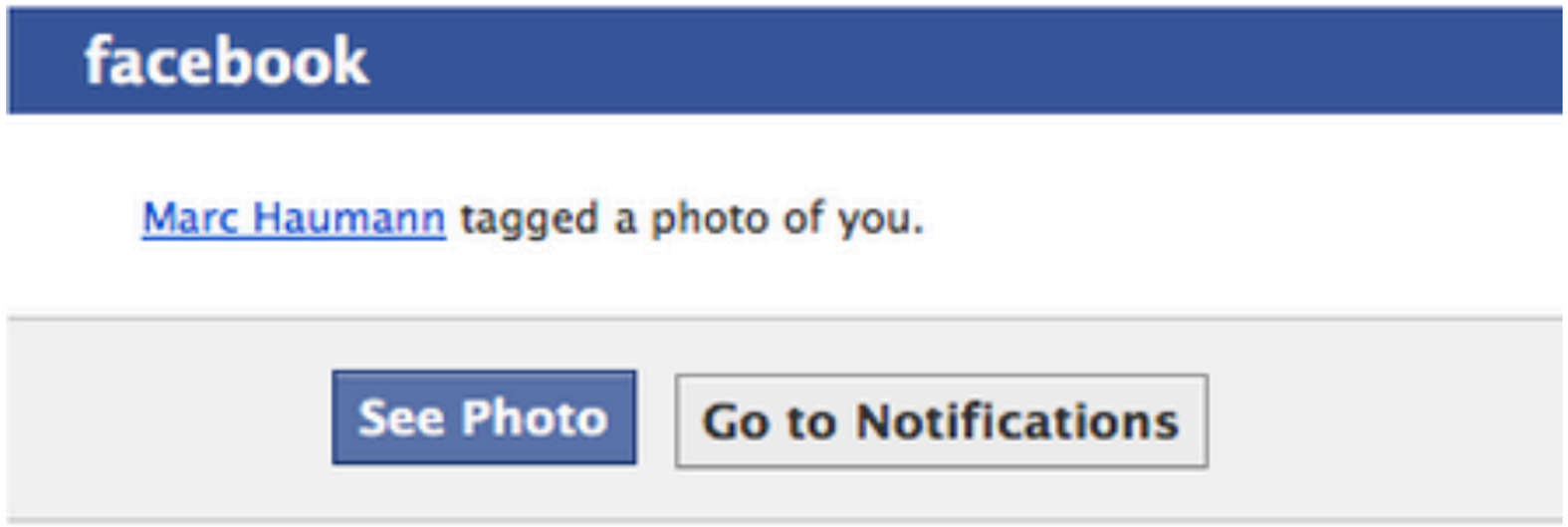

“Want to see this photo of you?”

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or more like…

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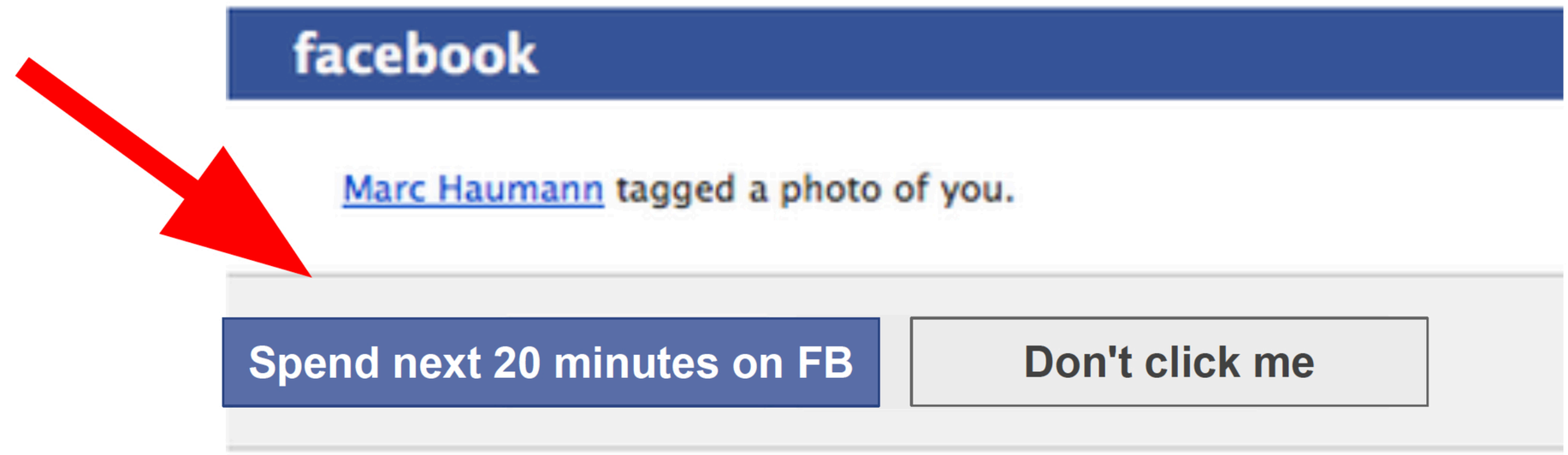

“Do you want to interrupt what you're doing and spend next 20 minutes on Facebook?”

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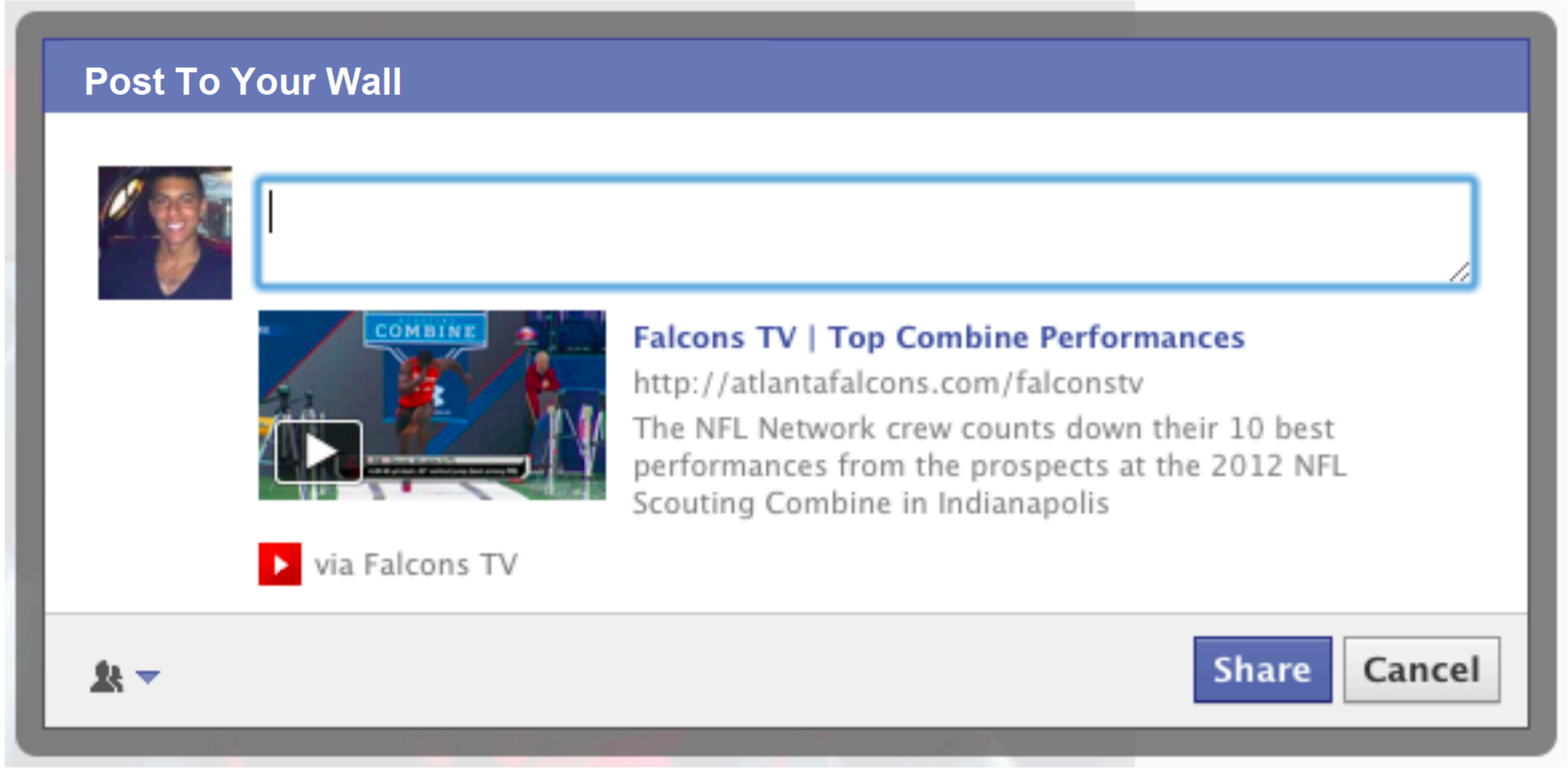

“Share this article?”

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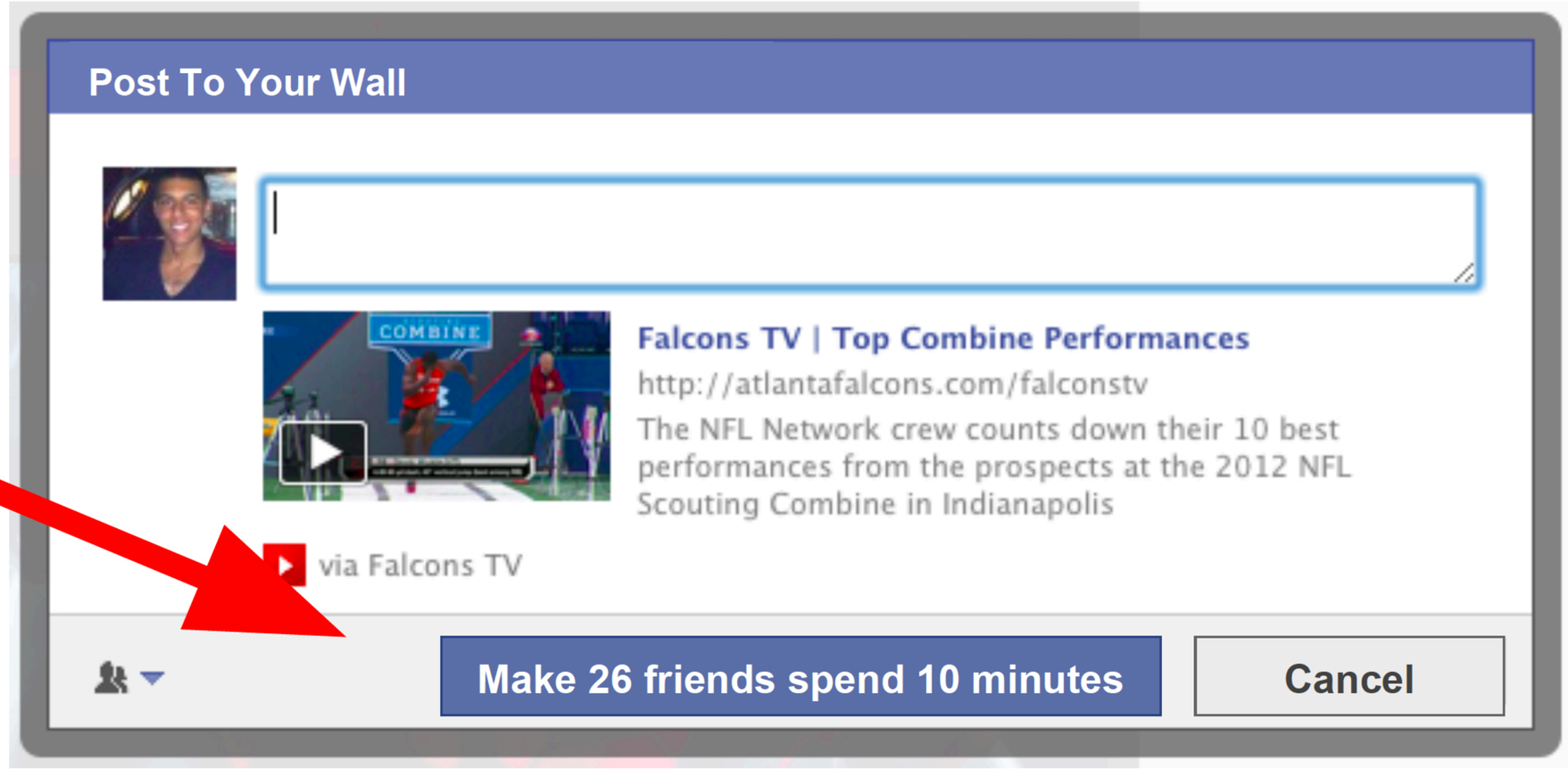

"Make ~26 friends spend 10 minutes reading this?"

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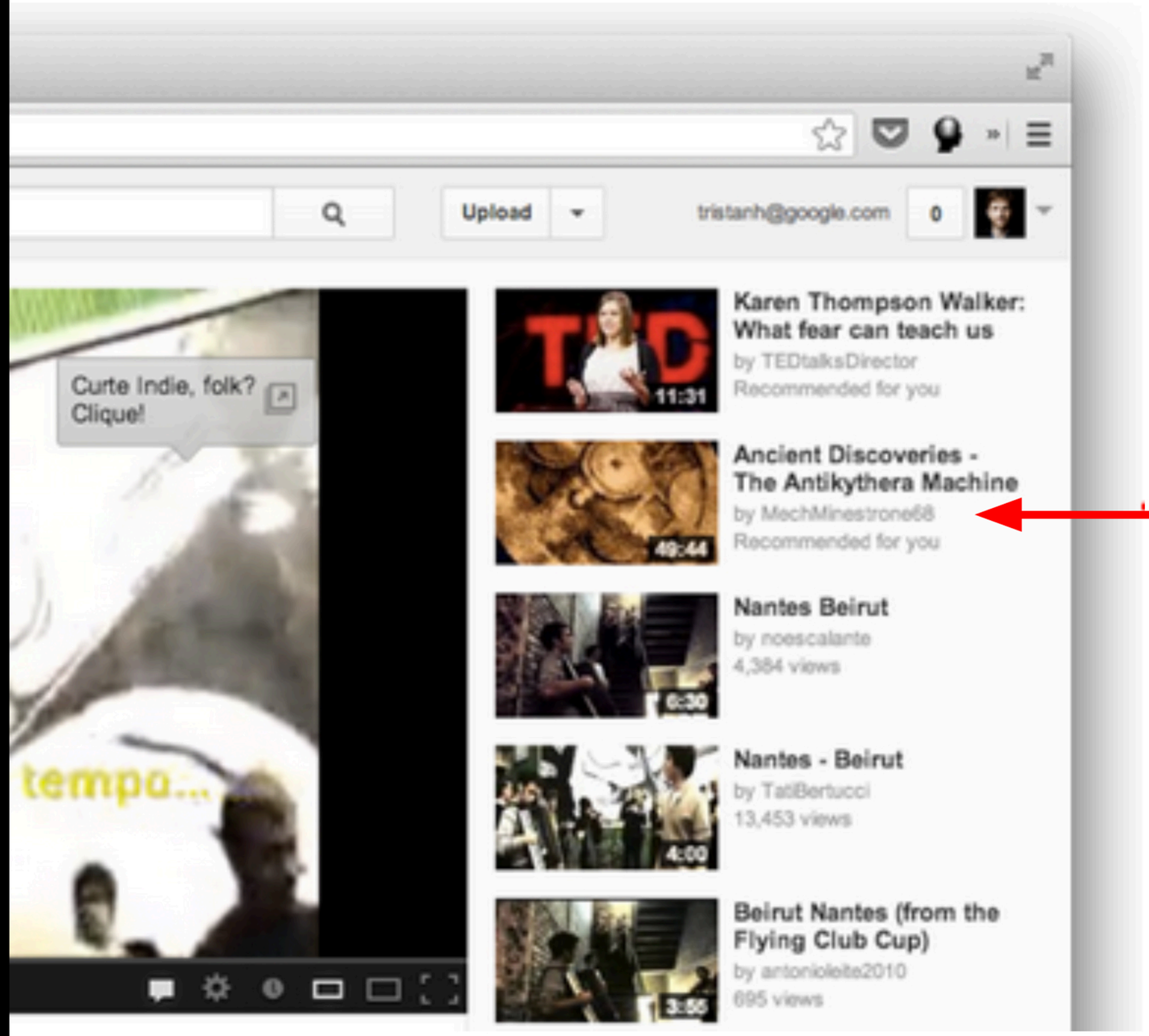

Watch a related video?

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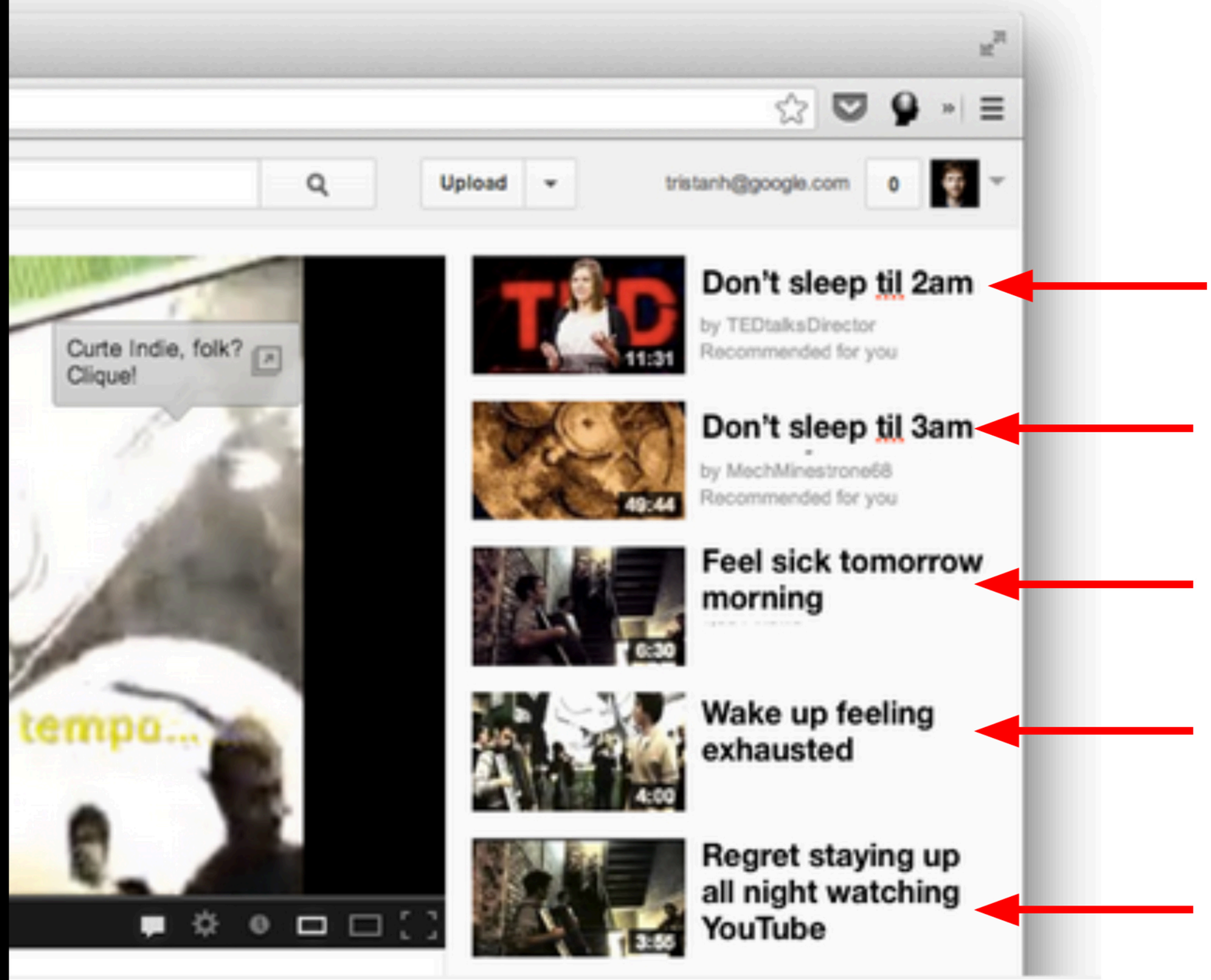

or…

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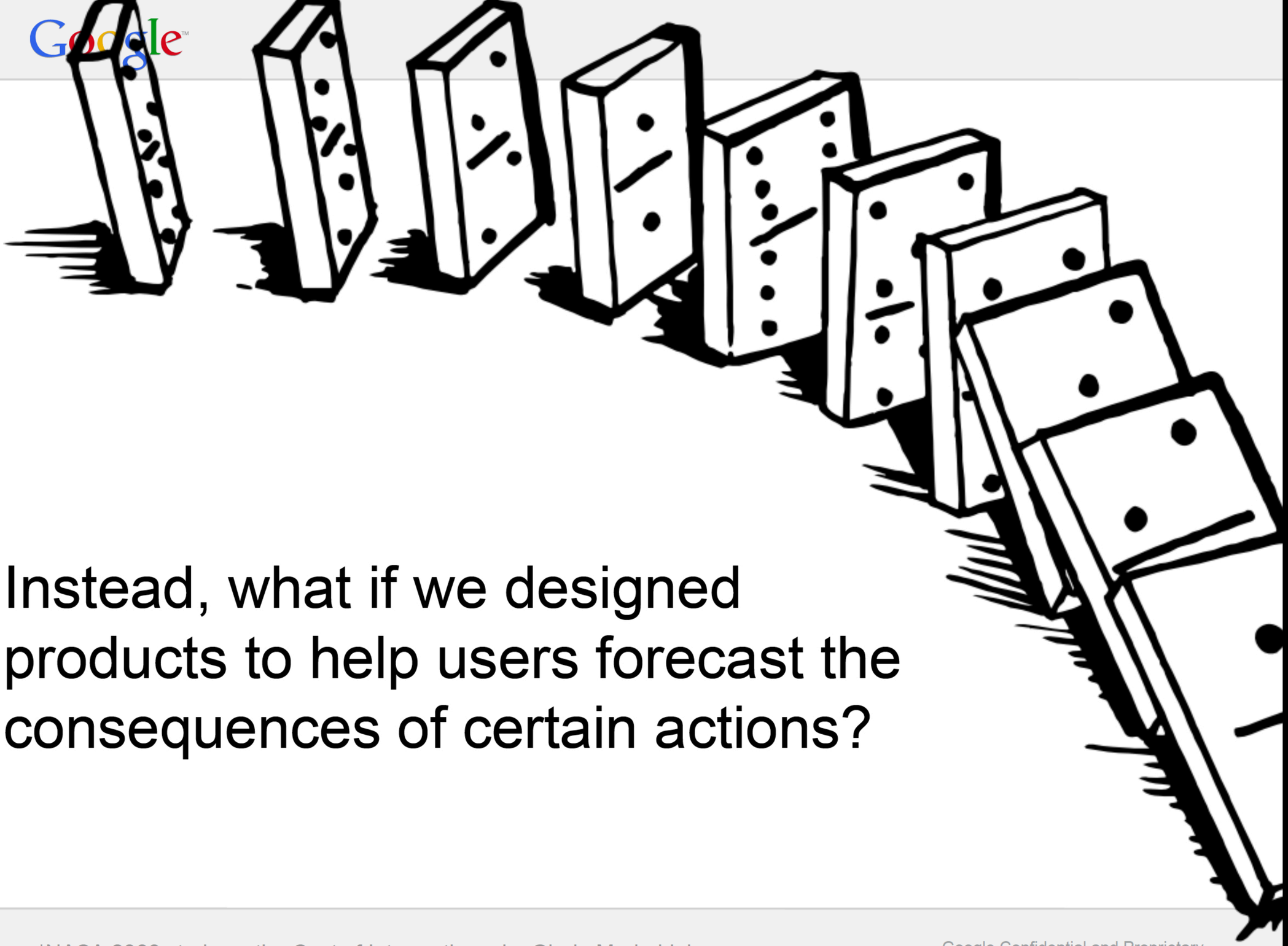

Instead, what if we designed products to help users forecast the consequences of certain actions?

*NASA 2008 study on the Cost of Interruptions, by Gloria Mark. Link

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Vulnerability #2:
Intermittent variable rewards
(aka Slot Machines)

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Intermittent (vs. predictable) rewards are the **most addictive**, and **hardest to stop**
(it's why slot machines **make the most money** at casinos)

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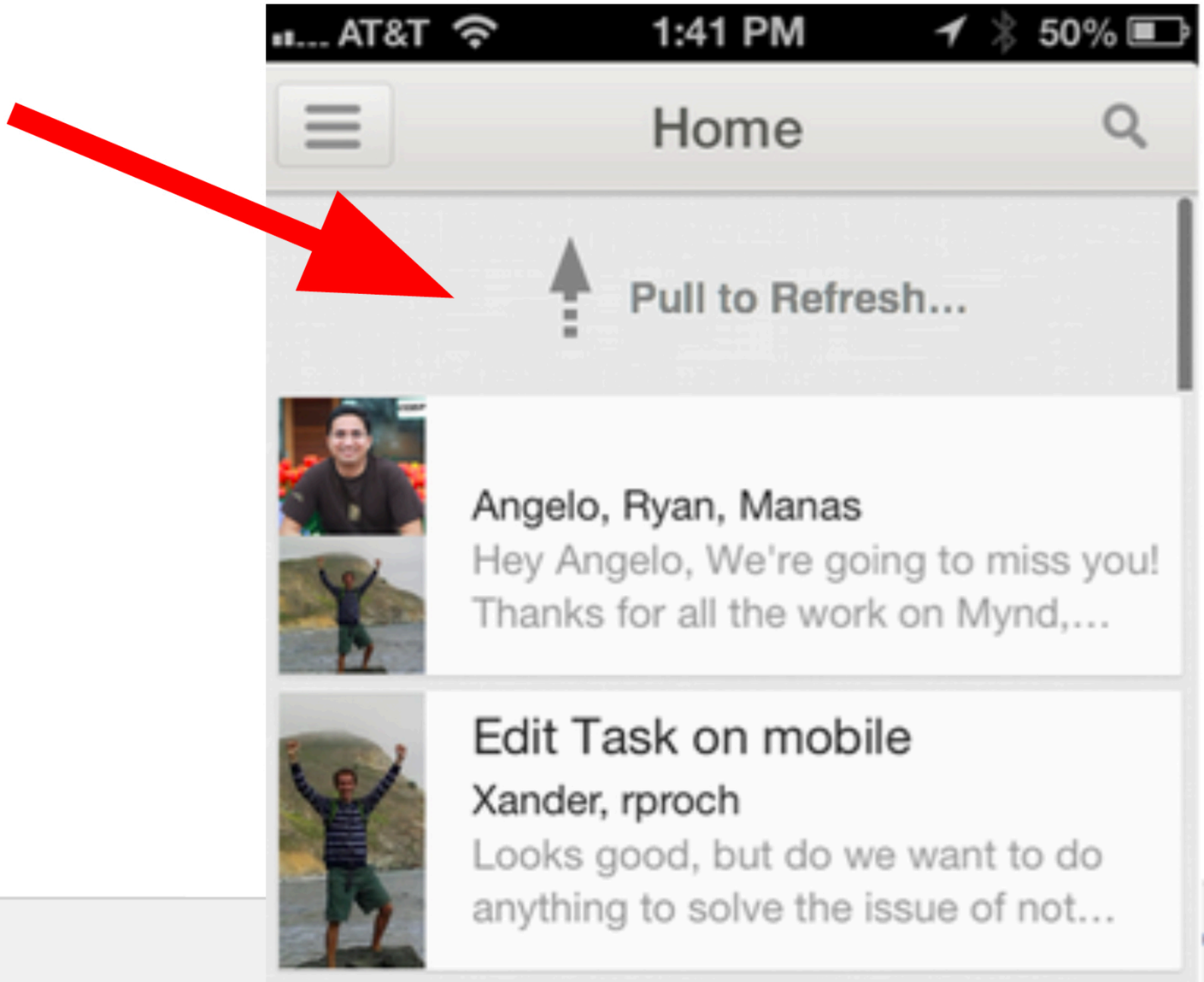
are we **deciding** to pull for new email?



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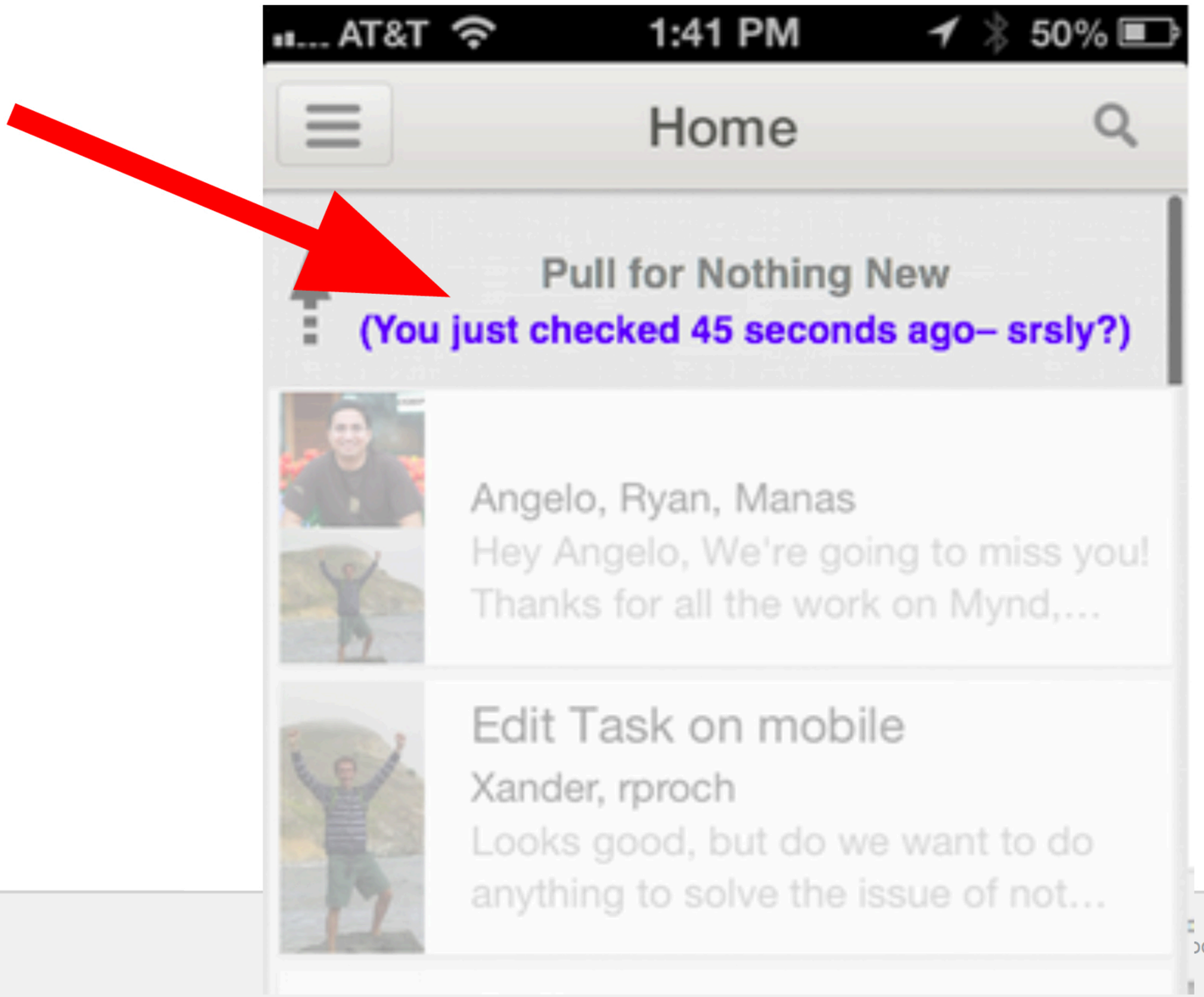
… or do we do it to feel the intermittent rewards?



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… are we **swiping** two fingers to scroll?

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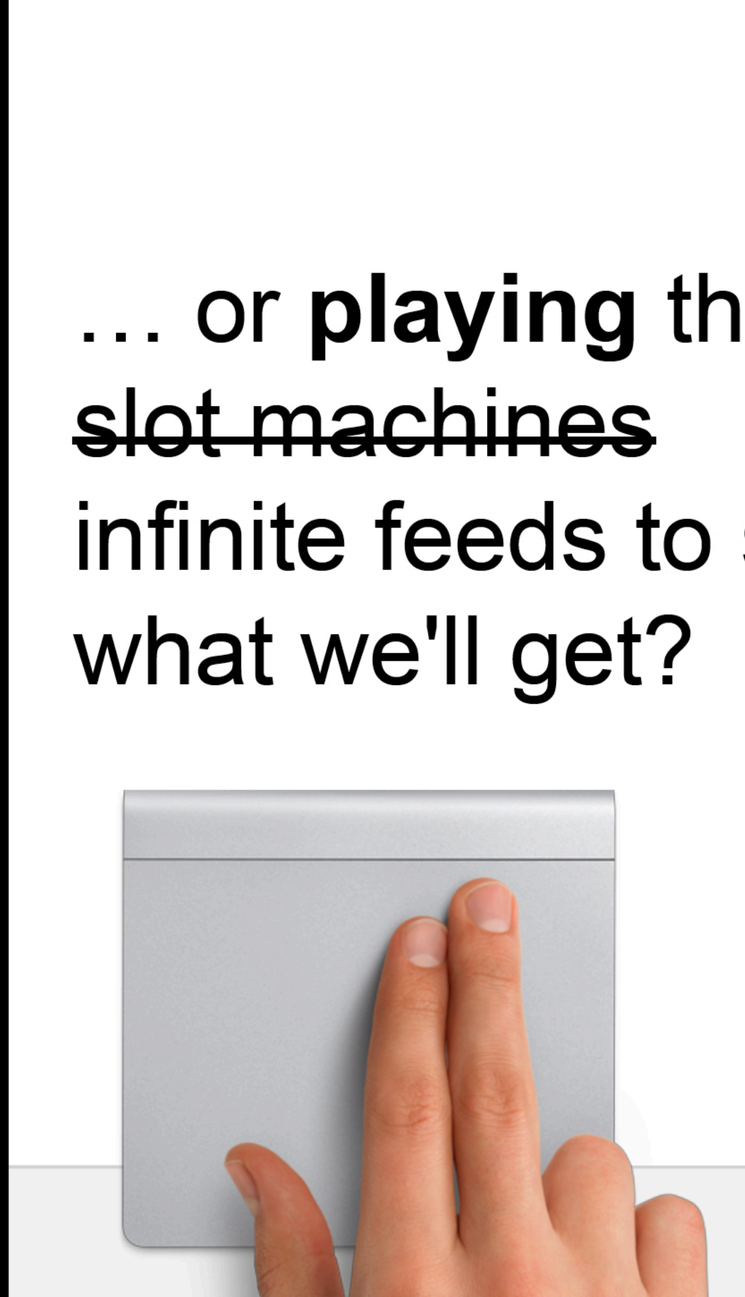
Google

… or **playing** the ~~slot machines~~ infinite feeds to see what we'll get?

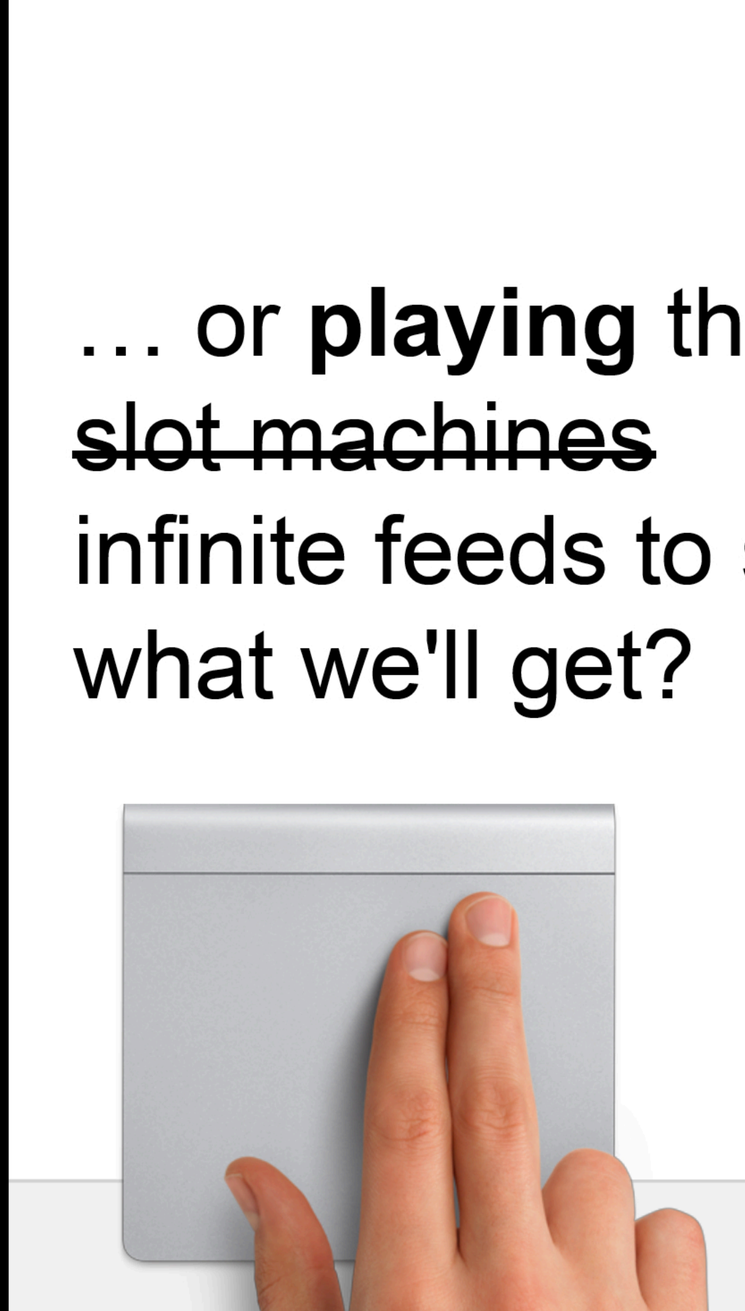
Google

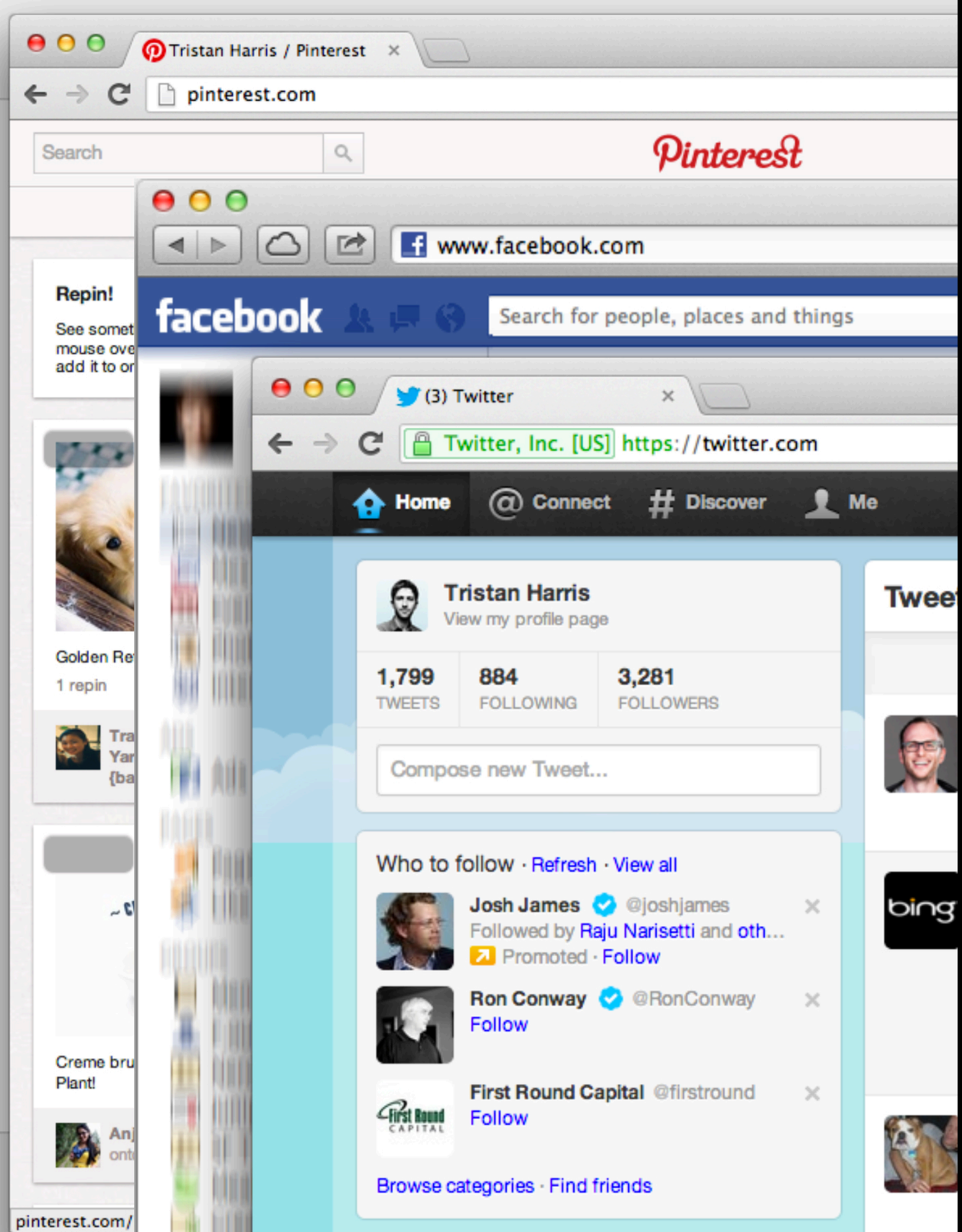
… or **playing** the ~~slot machines~~ infinite feeds to see what we'll get?



Google

… or **playing** the ~~slot machines~~ infinite feeds to see what we'll get?





These are **attention casinos…**

…because the house always wins.
We spend lots of time – are we getting the same value back?

Google

Instead, what if we designed to **minimize the presence** of intermittent variable rewards, and **reduce addictions**?

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Vulnerability #3: Loss-Aversion
(aka Fear of Missing Out)

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Suppose we actually **wanted to stop** checking all this stuff…

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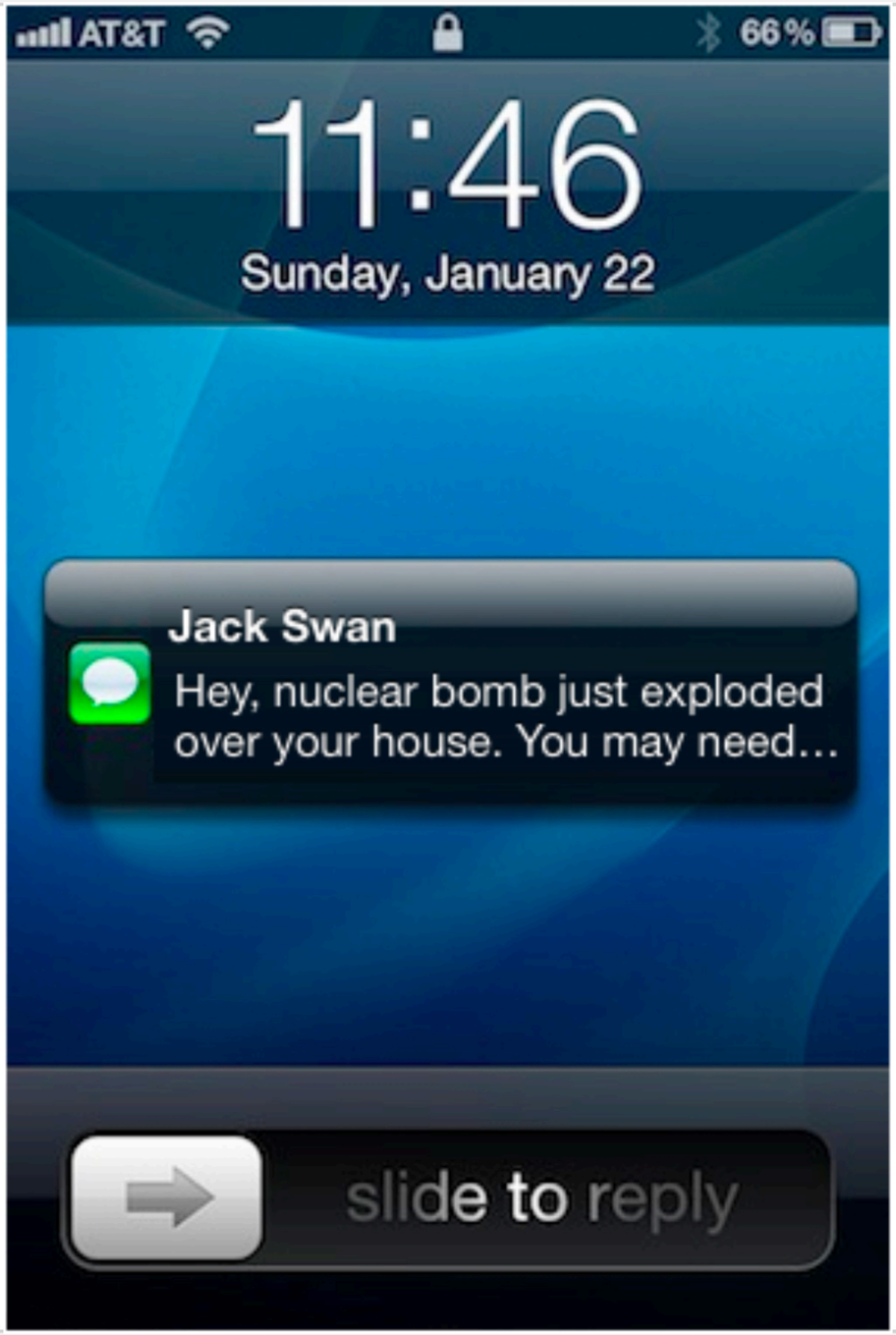
Loss-aversion won't let us,
because we'd be **terrified** **of missing something important**

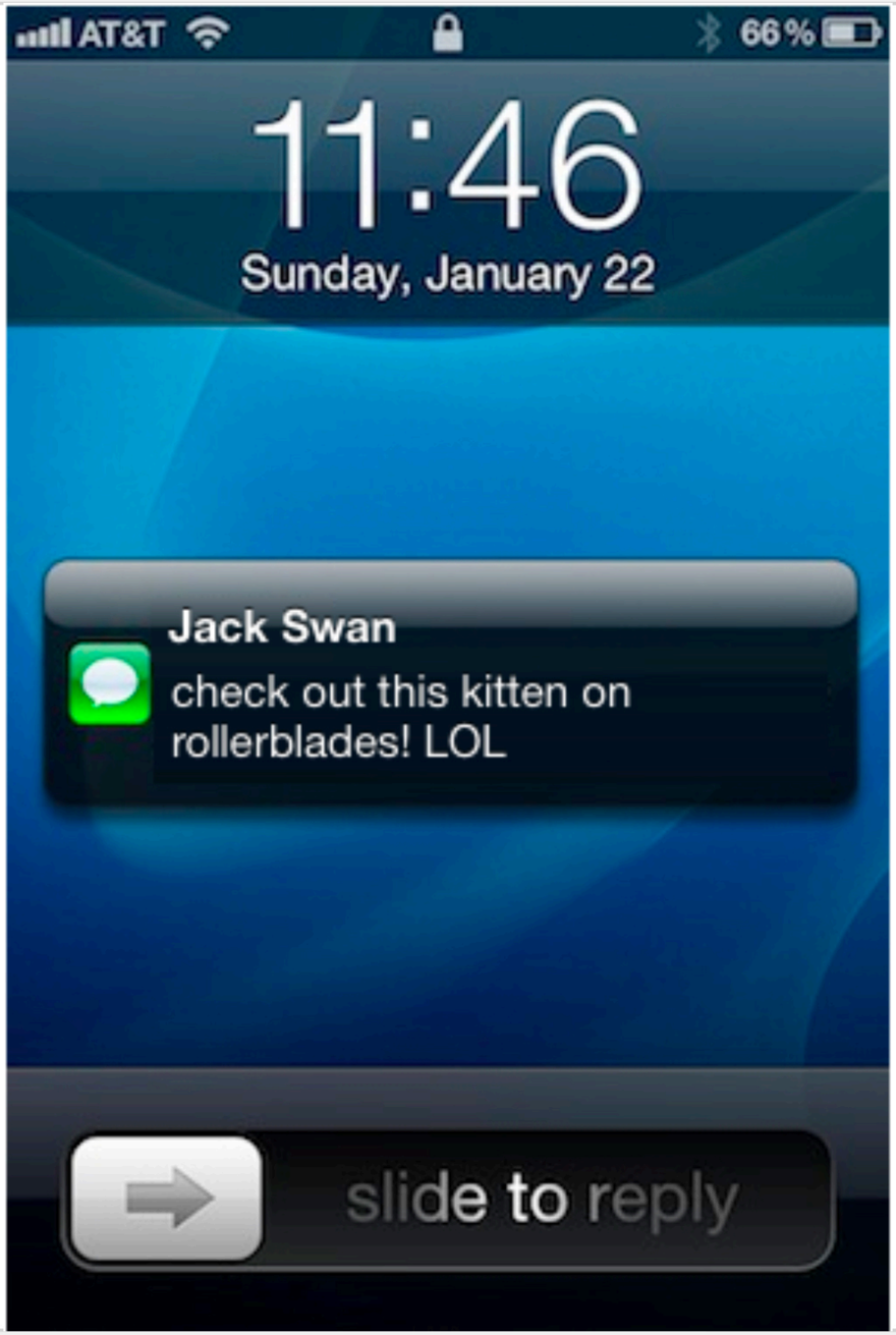
Google

so we're forced to live as if every message could be this…


AT&T
66%
11:46
Sunday, January 22
Jack Swan
Hey, nuclear bomb just exploded over your house. You may need…
slide to reply

Google

instead of this…



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Keeping us on a **treadmill**
of continuous checking

Google

Instead, what if we designed to **give users confidence** that they could disconnect more often, and not miss something important?

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Google

Vulnerability #4:
Fast vs. Slow Thinking
(aka Mindful vs. Mindless behavior)

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Humans make different decisions when we **pause and consider**, vs. when we **react immediately**.

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When access to the next hit is **too frictionless,** we *lose the ability* to consider before acting…

Google

When scrolling is **frictionless**, **we don't think** before we flick to see what's next…

or when it's
so frictionless,
we don't think
before we grab our
phone after it
buzzes

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…or **so frictionless, we don't think** before getting a snack after an urge.

Google

When we **lose that moment to consider** before acting on our impulses…

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... we lose **what sets us apart as thinking humans.**

Google

Instead, what if we designed to help users be **fast and efficient**, while leaving *enough friction* for users to **pause and consider**?

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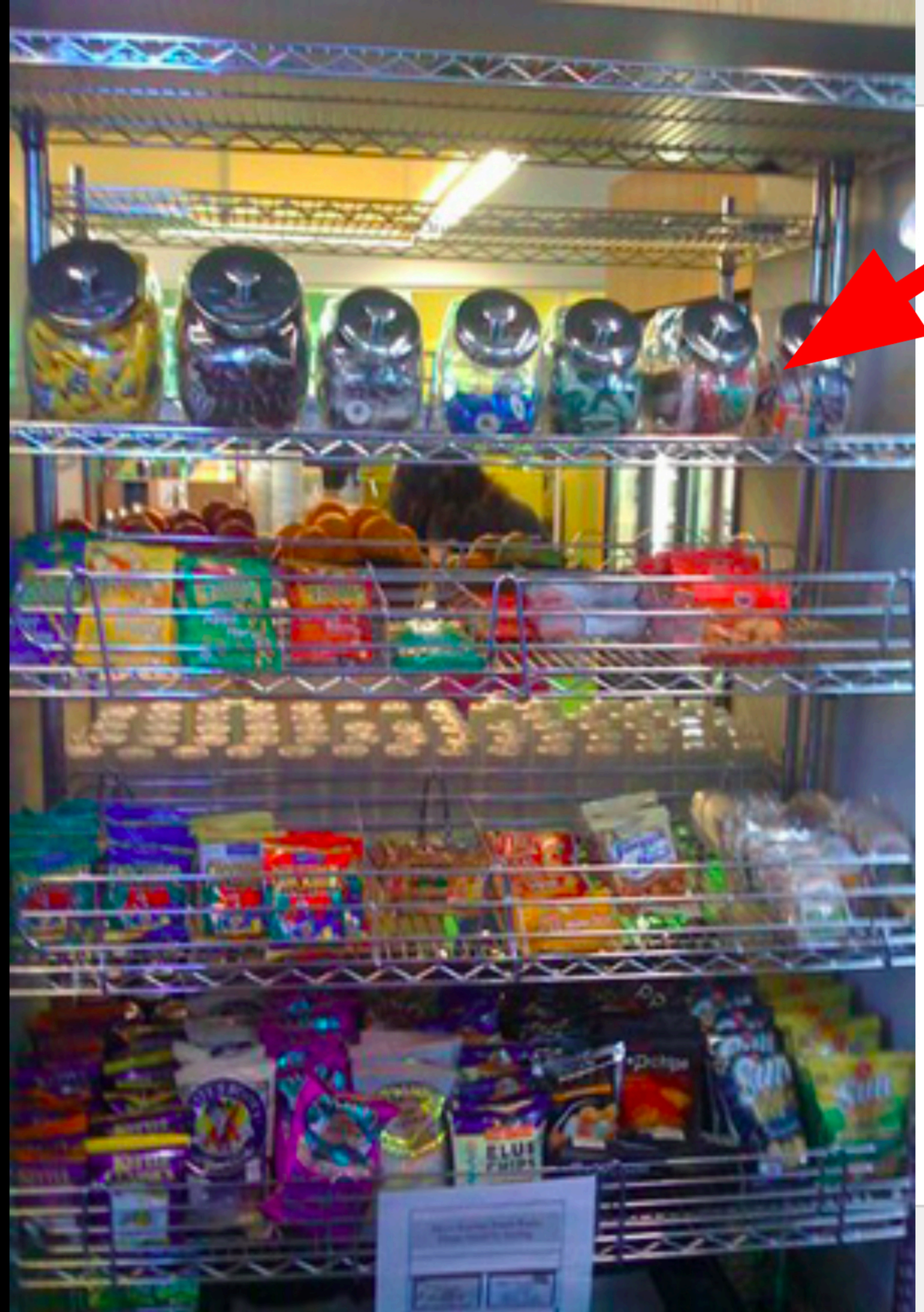

…just like Google makes unhealthy food available, but puts them inside jars and slightly out of sight

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(in other words, behind a **speed bump**)

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Google

Vulnerability #5: Stress & Altered States

(aka “I'm not in the best state of mind to decide…”)

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It's not just how technology changes

what we <u>do</u>…

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It's also how it changes

our physiological state…

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We actually
stop breathing when
we read our email…

(an effect known as “email apnea”)

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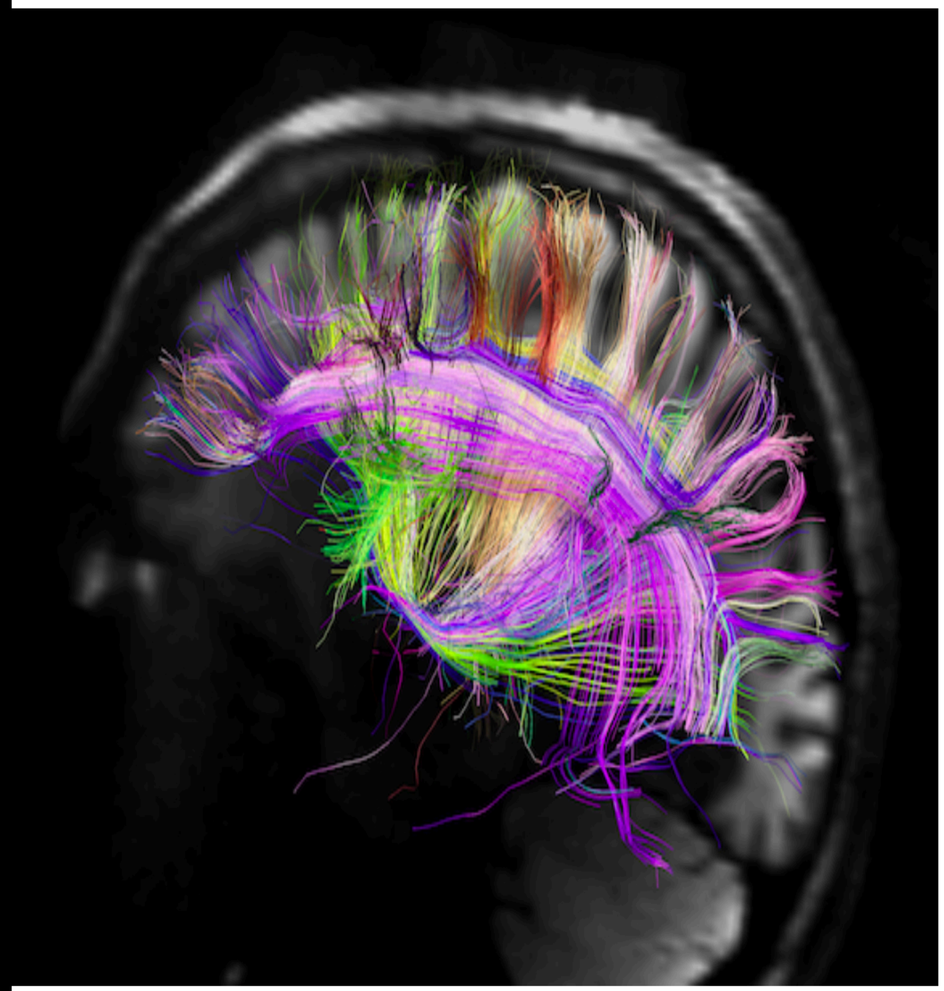

…our
sympathetic nervous system
is activated

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…causing our liver to **dump glucose and cholesterol into our blood…**

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…our **heart rate increases**…

…and our body prepares for a **fight or flight response**

Gmail Calendar Documents Photos Reader Web more Hiking Fan

Gmail by Google

SEARCH MAIL SEARCH THE WEB Show search options Create a filter

Mail

COMPOSE MAIL

Inbox (3)
Starred
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Urgent!
12 more

Chat
Search, add, invite
Hiking F
Set status here
Call phone
Arielle
Emily
Jason
Michael
Paul

Archive Report spam Delete Move to Labels More 1 - 15 of 15

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Jason Toff	How are you? - Hey there. We haven't spoken in a while. How are you? Wou	Mar 24
Jr Wikane	VW Auction in Tacoma - Hi, I was doing a search on Google for VW's in Tac	Mar 6

And all that happens between when we read our **1st email**...

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Gmail Calendar Documents Photos Reader Web more Hiking Fan

Gmail by Google

SEARCH MAIL SEARCH THE WEB Show search options Create a filter

Mail

COMPOSE MAIL

Inbox (3)

Starred

Sent Mail

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12 more

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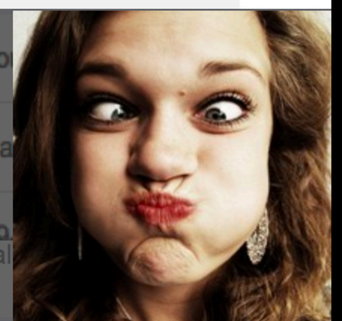
and when we read our **10th email**…



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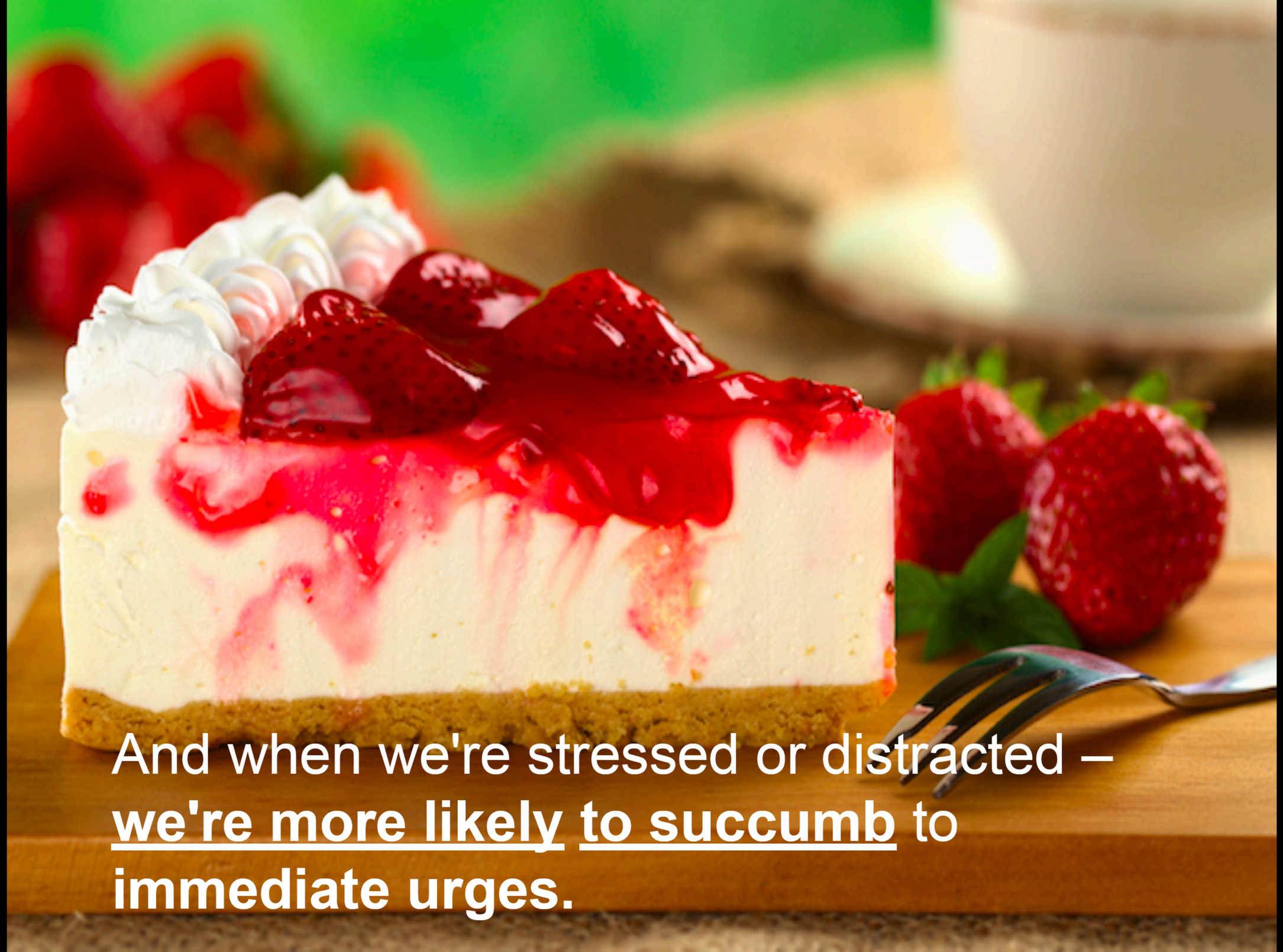

And when we're stressed or distracted – **we're more likely to succumb** to **immediate urges.**

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Do we really know what we're doing to people?

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Instead, what if we designed to **minimize stress** and create **calmer states of mind?**

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The problem is…

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Successful products **compete by exploiting these vulnerabilities**, so they can't remove them without sacrificing their success and growth.

…creating an **arms race** that causes companies to find **more reasons to steal people's time**

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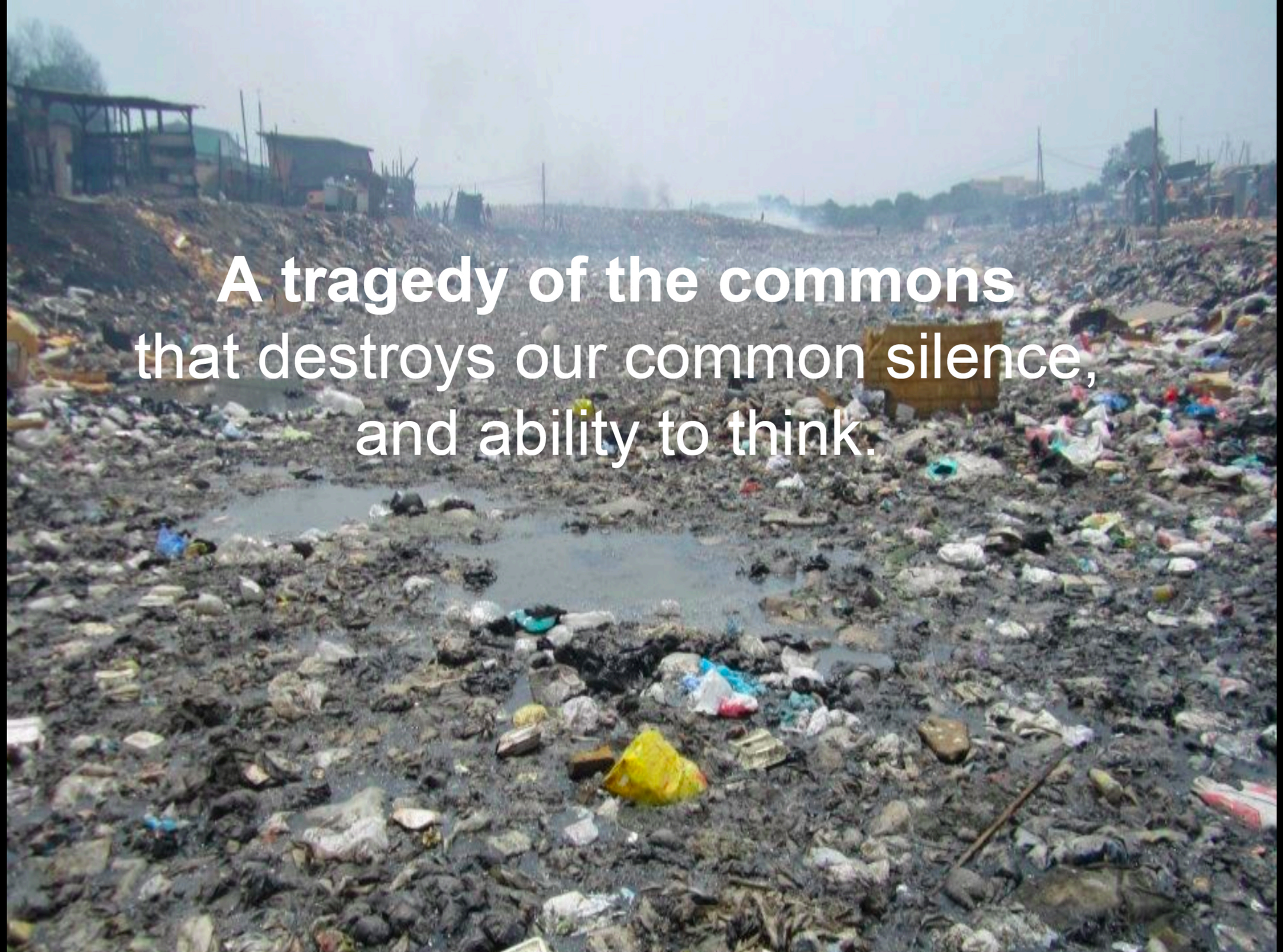
A tragedy of the commons
that destroys our common silence,
and ability to think.

So…

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what's the solution to all this?

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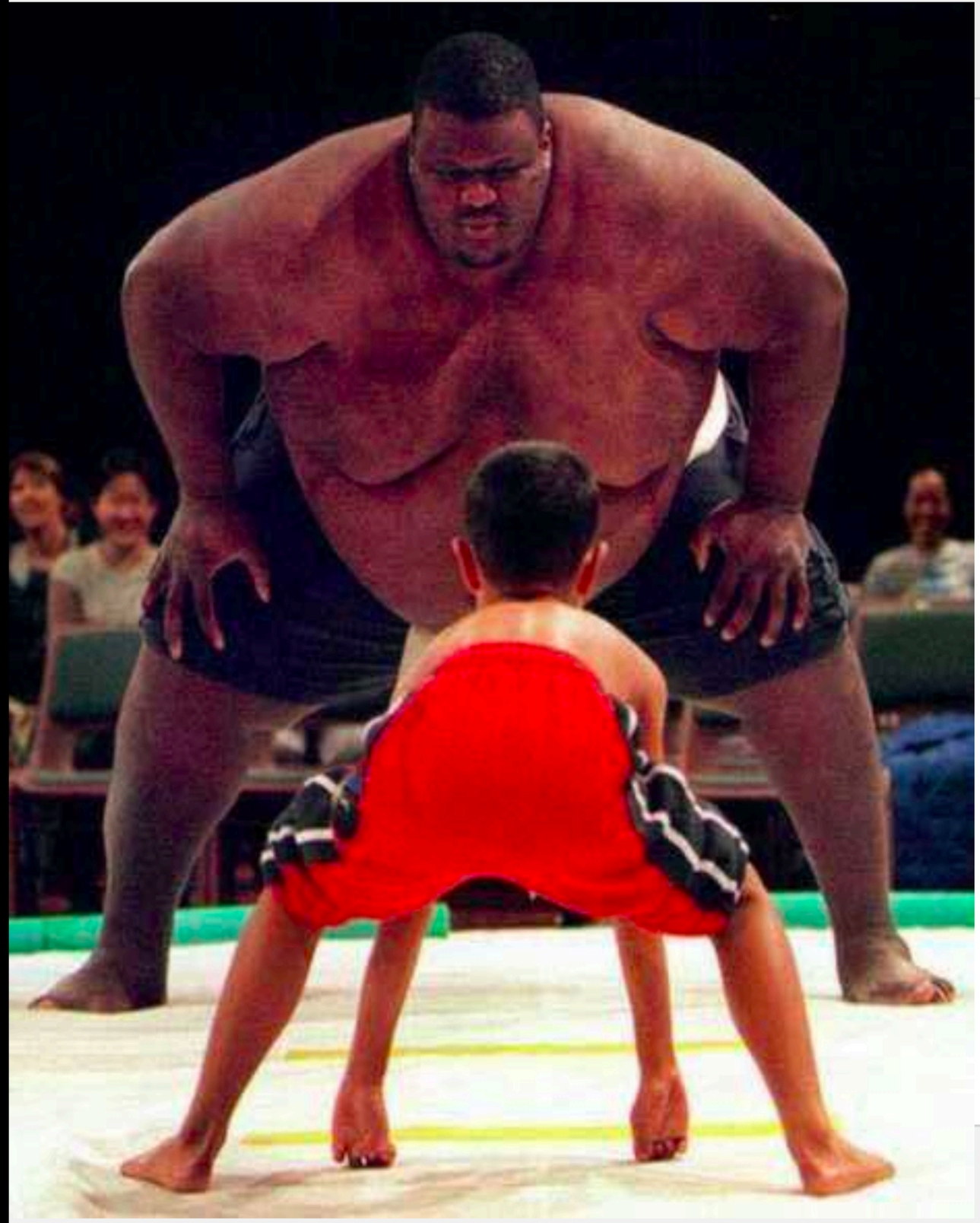

As a former entrepreneur, I can say that niche startups are **too small** to tackle this challenge…

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Change like this can only happen **top-down**, from large institutions that define the standards for millions of people…

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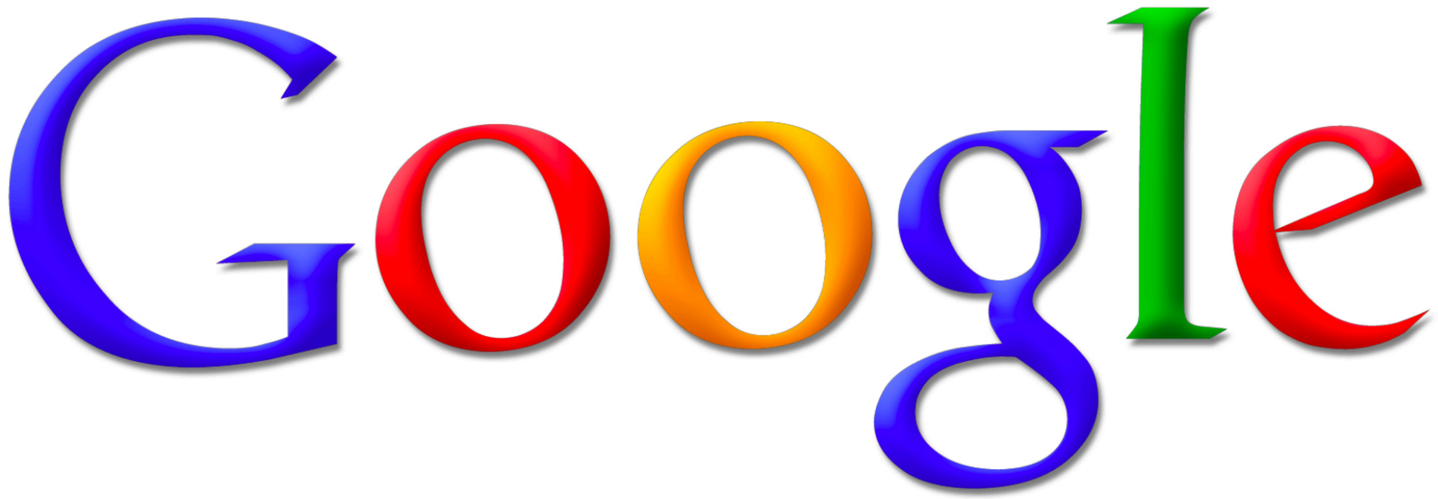

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And we're in **a great position** to do something about all this…

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ANDROID

We set the notification standards on
>50% of the world's mobile phones…

(4 trillion notifications sent last year on iOS alone)

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we shape > 11 billion interruptions to
people's lives *every day*…
(this is nuts!)

Millions of knowledge workers spend
1/3rd of their day in our email product.

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Hundreds of millions of people live in Chrome every day

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…and we have **fortunate** incentives.

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Google

Google Search I'm Feeling Lucky

Unlike many companies, our primary business model is **fulfilling human needs (searches),** and *getting people on with their lives*.

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not stealing more
of your time.

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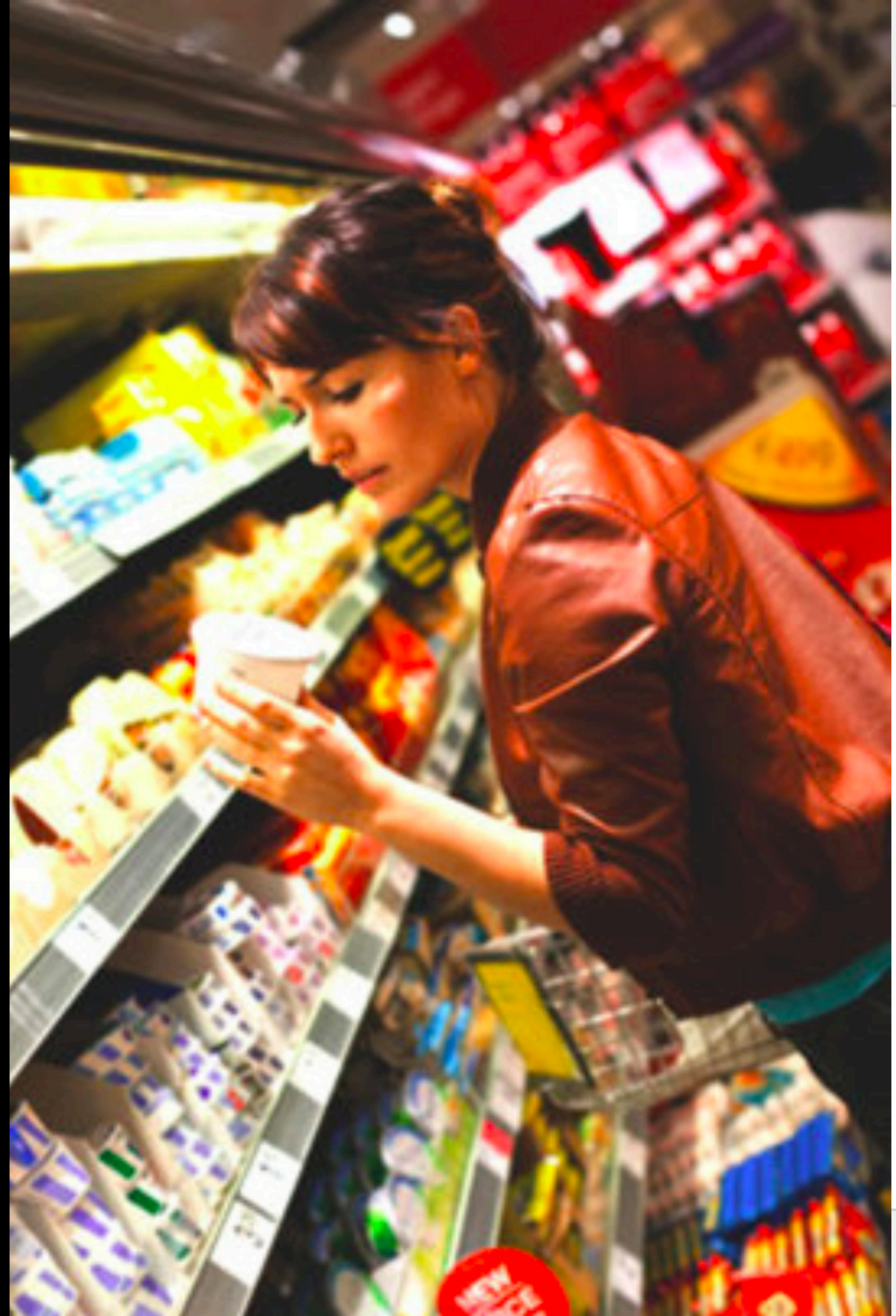
Just like **we trust our doctors** to do what's best and healthy for us

who swear by the **hippocratic oath** to use their knowledge ethically and to **do no harm**.

…and just like **we trust farmers** to sell us **safe and healthy food**

…and **ask careful questions** before making decisions that could affect our health



…because all we can do is buy what shows up at the supermarket

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Consumers

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trust

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US
EOS DIGITAL
CANON

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…to make **conscious decisions**

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…since **we choose the systems and defaults** that shape their lives

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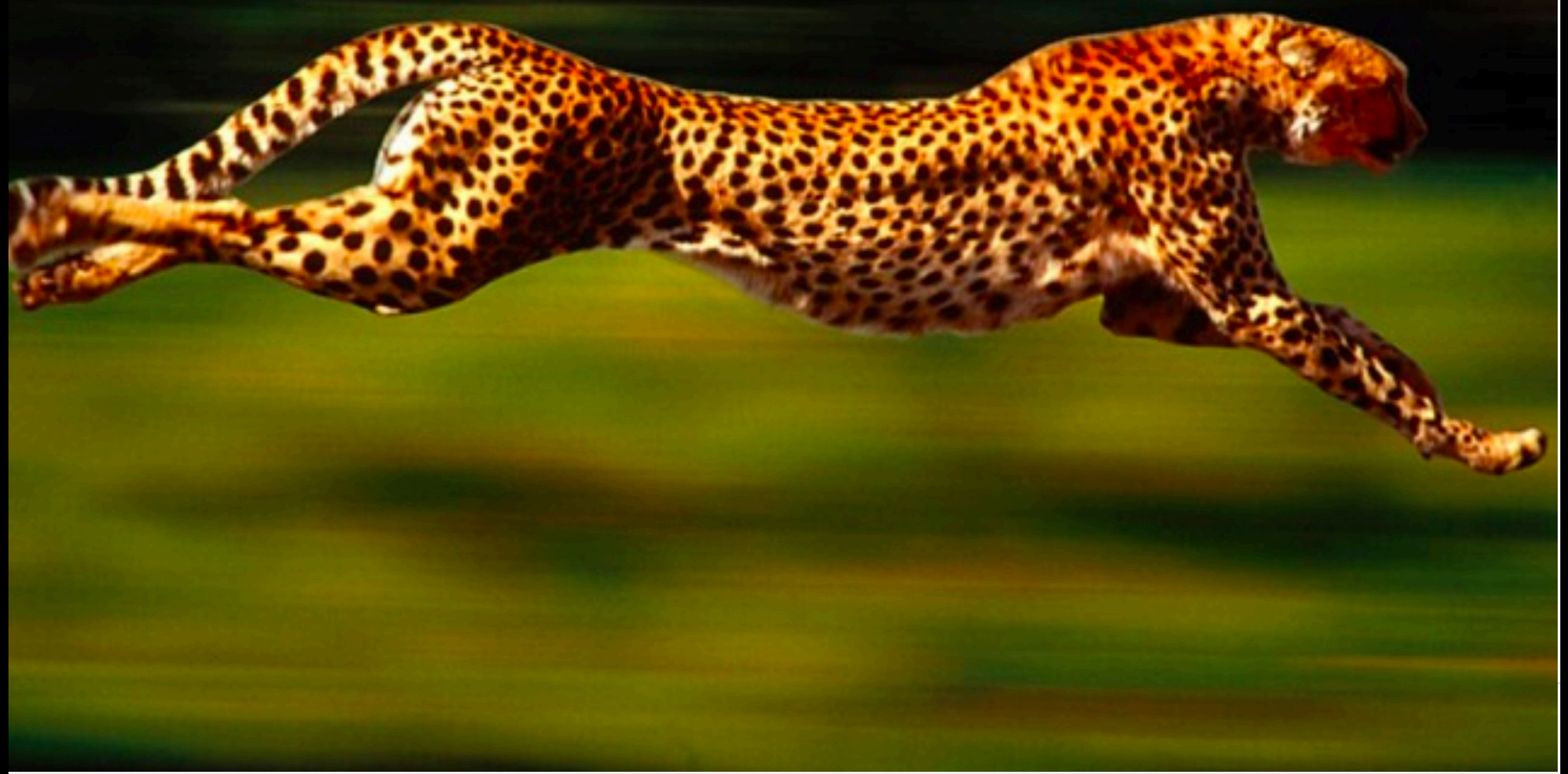
We already care about **speed and productivity**,
and helping users **get sh*t done**…



Let's also care about **minimizing distractions and interruptions**.

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We can design to reduce the volume and frequency of interruptions.

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We can design to be **respectful** about *when* to notify users– let it wait, unless it's important

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We can design to **keep users focused**, by putting temptations further away when they're trying to accomplish goals.

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We can batch up notifications & messages into **digests by default**, instead of one at a time

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Clearly, these are thorny issues…

There are **tough moral questions**,
competition-driven industry pressures,
and **nuanced human psychology factors**…

KENNEDY

… but just like we had a team to **standardize our design *aesthetic*** across the company …

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We could have a team to **standardize our design *ethics*** and define best practices to minimize distraction.

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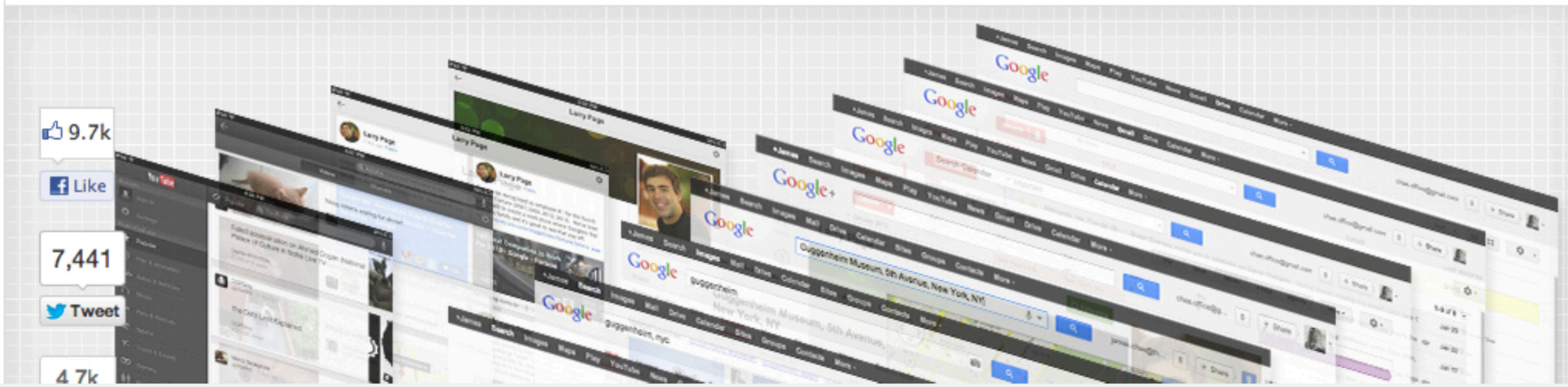
685 COMMENTS

Google's New Team Tackles Distraction and Consumer Well-Being

A new group is making sure Google's products aren't just great, but actually make people happy.

By Verge Staff on January 24, 2013 12:06 pm



But we can't wait any longer to figure it out.

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Join the Community:

Attention-Respectful Googlers

(…**now 1500+ Googlers** and growing!)

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or visit:

go/attention-respectful

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Send in the most distracting aspects of products in your life.

(screenshots or descriptions are fine)

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How would you change them?

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How could we do more to respect the user's attention?

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And share this presentation with your co-workers… start a conversation!

go/distraction

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Appendix & Links

There's of great thinkers and experts who would be eager to help us work through these tough questions (from many different ages, backgrounds, genders)…

- BJ Fogg
- Linda Stone
- Kelly McGonigal
- Kathy Sierra
- Dan Ariely
- Daniel Kahneman
- Sherry Turkle
- Gloria Mark
- Neema Moraveji, Stanford Calming Tech lab
- Wisdom 2.0 conference

Many even at Google!

- Hal Varian, Chief Economist @ Google
- John Boyd, author of "The Time Paradox"
- Joe Kraus ("Culture of Distraction", partner at Google Ventures)
- Google Ideas

There are some great books, articles, etc on the subjects of Willpower, Ego Depletion, Habit formation, Addiction, Pleasure, Psychophysics, Free Will, etc:

- "The Illusion of Conscious Will" by Daniel Wegner
- "Amusing Ourselves to Death" by Neil Postman
- "Thinking Fast And Slow" by Daniel Kahneman
- "Flow" by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
- "The Willpower Instinct" by Kelly McGonigal
- "Compass of Pleasure" by David Linden
- "Alone Together" by Sherry Turkle
- "Diagnosis: Email Apnea" by Linda Stone
- "Is Twitter TOO Good?" by Kathy Sierra
- "The Time Paradox: The New Psychology of Time That Will Change your Life" by John Boyd and Philip Zimbardo

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